

Click to Print

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

## School chooses Kindle; are libraries for the history 'books'?

By Greg Toppo, USA TODAY

ASHBURNHAM, Mass. — Cushing Academy is the very model of a modern [New England](#) boarding school.

Clock tower? Check.

Maples and meandering footpaths? Check.

Flags representing the 193 home countries of its alumni? Check.

But in the past few years, the old library was in danger of becoming a relic. Its 20,000-book collection was barely used, administrators say. Spot checks last year found that, on some days, fewer than 30 books, or about .15%, circulated. And it was becoming rather lonely down there.

"I'd come in here during a free period, there'd be no one in here," says junior Caitlin Forest.

So the venerable boarding school west of Boston — the first in the USA to admit both boys and girls — last summer undertook another first: It began getting rid of most of the library's books. In their place: a fully digital collection.

### AT COLLEGES: Technology 'catching up' with students

Library watchers say it could be the first school library, public or private, to forsake ink and paper in favor of e-books. It also represents the first time a school has placed its students' intellectual lives so fully into the hands of a few online publishers and makers of electronic devices.

Researching the Boston Molasses Disaster of 1919? Use your laptop (handed out to students on financial aid) or a library PC to access the 13 databases to which Cushing now subscribes.

Reading [David Copperfield](#) in English class? A librarian will gladly download it onto one of 65 Kindle handheld electronic book readers from [Amazon.com](#), which circulate like library books.

Three big-screen TVs now greet visitors at the entrance, and the old circulation desk is now a coffee bar. Officially it's called Cushing Cyber Cafe, but students quickly nicknamed the spot "12K Cafe" after its \$12,000 espresso machine.

### An angry backlash

Naturally, the blogosphere flipped.

After reading about the plan last month in the *Boston Globe*, bloggers and commenters worldwide have called headmaster [Jim Tracy](#) a snob, a spendthrift and a book burner and even compared him to [Adolf Hitler](#). One commenter on the blog parentdish.com urged, "Save the books, fire the instigator of the book-burning. Let [Hitler](#) stay dead."

All very curious when you meet Tracy, a soft-spoken, painfully polite guy who's a bit bewildered that so few people get it: His tiny school's collection is growing from 20,000 books to millions.

"It was really to save libraries five, 10, 15 years down the road," he says. "What the students are telling us is: 'We're not using the print books. You can keep giving them to us, but they're just going to collect dust.' So we're saying, 'Let's be honest: Let's give them the best electronic information available.'"

Actually, he says, he has hired more librarians to help students navigate the electronic stacks and tell "what is valuable information or reliable from what is junk."

He concedes that the \$12,000 coffeemaker has become a distraction, but he says the real idea behind the cafe was to

that was easy.®

## Hot tech deals!

Roll over to see more.

**Acer laptop with AMD Athlon™ 6...**  
**\$349.98**  
 Save \$100, PLUS \$75 trade

create "a new commons, a new *agora*, where people in a convivial setting exchange ideas and socially interact around ideas with culture and literature at their fingertips."

Many book-loving bloggers gave Tracy grief for telling the *Globe*, "When I look at books, I see an outdated technology, like scrolls before books." But he says he was talking about books' usefulness for research, not for pleasure reading.

"If I look out the window and I see a student reading [Chaucer](#), to me it's utterly immaterial whether it's a paperback or a Kindle. I'm just glad that they're reading Chaucer."

[Tom Corbett](#), Cushing's director of Media and Academic Technology, says the new research system "does a much better job than this," pointing to the remaining 10,000 books on shelves, which will be gone by next September — the first 10,000 disappeared last summer, donated to staff and other schools. All that's left of that half of the collection is a series of elongated dark carpet areas where the shelves once stood.. Donated books will stay — as will a group of Cushing-related books and a tiny children's collection kept for staff members' kids.

New Kindles run from \$200 to \$500, but Corbett says he can purchase many e-titles much more cheaply than traditional books. Often he pays just \$5 apiece, so for the price of a \$30 hardback, he now orders six e-books.

History teacher Peter Clarke says that makes the Kindle project "a no-brainer."

"There's this emotional attachment to books," he says. "But on the other hand, there's this possibility."

Last year, when he assigned a research project on the [Industrial Revolution](#), he says students scrambled to the library for reference books, but few found what they needed. "We had a real access problem," he says.

All the same, doesn't Cushing risk becoming beholden to Amazon.com and its editorial decisions? Doesn't it risk becoming, in essence, Amazon High School?

"We have to work with what we have," Corbett says.

While he's bound, for now, to the selection that Amazon offers — as of this week, that totaled around 366,000 titles — Corbett says he anticipates that the Kindle itself will "become less important" in a few years. He notes, for instance, that students can now buy Kindle titles on their iPhones and iPod Touch players.

Though if you really want to talk about corporate dominance, just ask Clarke about the USA's textbook adoption process and what *that* does for academic freedom.

"I'm looking for something, as an educator, that's going to break that donkey's back," he says.

#### **A model for other schools?**

Critics see the value — and inevitability — of increasing libraries' digital collections but say that to remove virtually all printed materials is a mistake.

"This is not necessarily a model for other school libraries," says [American Library Association](#) President Camila Alire. "It's a private prep school, it's a residential campus, and they also have the funds to do things like this."

Actually, Tracy says, that's the point: The school can afford it, so why shouldn't it? He wants to share what he learns with other schools — and is partnering with Oxford University to offer any materials it develops as a free, open-source guide.

As for the students' ability to pay for the gadgets, Tracy says, that's an even stronger argument. Though many are on financial aid, his students, for better or worse, are "going to have disproportionate influence" on the world. What better place than Cushing to teach them how to navigate the world wisely and with "humanizing values?"

Cassandra Barnett, president of the American Association of School Librarians, says most reference materials are going online, but she wonders how Cushing librarians will attract kids to books they might not otherwise seek out. "I can't display ... a whole bunch of Kindles with the covers of books."

Ron Hogan, senior editor at Galley Cat, a New York-based news blog about the publishing industry, says he has less discomfort than most about the shift to digital materials but worries about constantly changing technology that could make today's cutting-edge Kindle worthless in 10 years. "I've got a drawer full of 7-inch floppy discs here," he says. "That data is lost to me."

Ink on paper, by contrast, hasn't changed much in hundreds of years. "It's an amazingly easy technology to get access to the material from," he says. "You can pick up a book from today, 20 years ago, 50 years ago, 100, 200 years ago, and they all function perfectly fine — you open up the book and you start to read."

Most students love the new library, but a few remain skeptical.

On a recent afternoon, three days after it opened, the Cushing library was anything but lonely. Caitlin and her friend Terra Barton, 17, sat in a pair of upholstered chairs overlooking a bank of full-length windows (on the other side is a brick courtyard that's still being built). On either end of the long, narrow library, teachers taught classes with the aid of computerized Smartboards.

A constant stream of backpack-toting students filed in and out of the 12-K Cafe, ordering cappuccinos, smoothies and snacks. The scene resembled an after-school malt shop more than a library.

Nearby, Gaby Skok, 18, a senior, sat with two friends. Her blonde hair pulled back in a pony tail, the painter [Frida Kahlo](#) staring out from an oversized ring on her finger, Skok says the idea that the library is now "some hip, trendy place" bugs

her. She likes that it was once quiet and rarely used, actually.

And don't get her started on the coffee.

"People shouldn't have to be encouraged by frothy beverages to hang out in a library," she says.

Asher Chase, 16, a junior, says anyone who thinks digital books are the future should read a digital book. He remembers his English class last year being assigned [Charles Dickens'](#) *A Christmas Carol* on their laptops.

Taking notes on the text? Forget it. "It was terrible: 'Shade, file, edit, highlight.' We were like, 'Wow, reading books on computers is awful.' "

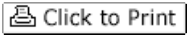
Then there are the giant TVs on the wall greeting library patrons as they enter — tuned that afternoon to a [C-SPAN](#) congressional hearing, a big-think TED conference session and some sort of [NASA](#) feed from space — all with the sound turned down. Skok simply can't believe that Tracy has let flickering TV monitors, à la [George Orwell's 1984](#), invade the library.

"Dr. Tracy, I love him, I respect him," she says. "But has he *read* a dystopian novel?"

|

**Find this article at:**

[http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2009-10-26-kindle-school-library\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2009-10-26-kindle-school-library_N.htm)



[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

☐ Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

Copyright 2009 USA TODAY, a division of Gannett Co. Inc.